

A Sociological Study of Paintings

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1. Introduction

There are no societies in the world without pictures. There are no cultures without forms of art such as music, dance, literature, poetry, and sculptures. Especially pictures are abundant everywhere, at any time. Since pictures and paintings are very familiar phenomena, a sociological study is not out of place. As a matter of fact, my earliest interest in such a study dates back to the 1960's, when I began inquiring into the problems of the sociology of technology. From that time on I felt that there was a need to study the relationships between technology and art as well as the relationships between art and society, that is, art as embedded in the social. Ever since I wrote *The Sociology of Technology* (Minerva, Kyōto, 1965), the matter did not leave my mind. Now, an old dream is coming true, since my *A Sociology of Paintings* is forthcoming (Kōyō Publishing Company, Kyōto). The present paper is a summary of the main points of the latter study.

Generally stated, art (Kunst) is constituted both by means of technological and artistic expression. We know that pictures of buildings, bridges, trains, automobiles, furniture and tableware are very different from blue prints of the same things. But what exactly constitutes the difference between acts that produce art and those that materialize technical drawings?

Before entering into the matter concerned, I would like to advance two particular reasons among many others. First, painting and the drawing of pictures is part of the culture of human beings, which contrasts sharply with the world of other animals, who do not have culture and who are unable to appreciate works of art. We have many sociological studies of culture, of religion, ethics, science, technology, education, etc, but sociological studies of art are very few. Why are the latter lacking?

Second, compared with earlier times, modern society witnesses, as it were, a flood of works of art. Being so much accustomed to this situation, we are inclined to overlook the fact that our society is an affluent society of pictures and paintings. Every citizen in our society has opportunities to visit art exhibitions, museums and art galleries, exhibiting both domestic and foreign works. Recently, there has been a boom in art galleries. 550 new ones were opened from 1970 to 1990. Moreover, business enterprises organize art collections and related programs. Again, the mass media, especially TV, introduce almost every day works of fine art, both Japanese and foreign, while functioning at the same time as educators of art. These two reasons seem to be sufficient to warrant a sociological study of painting, as an important aspect of modern culture.

2. Some conceptions of the sociology of paintings.

Since paintings are one kind of art, one could apply the method of the sociology of art to the sociology of paintings. As one dictionary has it, the goal of the sociology of art is to clarify its social structure, its functions, and concomitant consciousness. Another wants to have the problems clarified that pertain to men of genius, their style, functions, and enjoyment of life as related to their social situations. Dr. K. Kurauchi, who established his own theory in cultural sociology concerning Oriental and Western culture, maintained that the sociology of art should shed light on the social essence of art, the social conditions that stimulate the emergence of styles such as symbolism and realism; further, he claimed, it should clarify the relationships among artists and between professionals and amateurs. As a matter of fact, a common understanding concerning the sociology of art does not exist. Therefore, it may be advisable and easier to attempt a more clear-cut delineation of a somewhat restricted sociology of painting by defining its object and method of study.

First, to discuss the object of this study, we can proceed as is done in the case of literature, where the main objects of study are the author, his work and his readers. In the case of painting we can single out in the same way the artists (among which we include amateurs), their work of art, and its appreciators as objects of study. I shall attempt a study of these three entities from the point of view of acting, that is, as drawing and appreciating works of art. However,

since our actors live and act within the larger society, it is necessary to look into the related institutions, organizations, and the relationships concerned. Again, with respect to culture we can ask what art contributes to it. In sum, we can say that the object of our sociological study is fivefold : 1) the paintings themselves, 2) the action that creates art, 3) the persons taking part in the action, 4) the collectivities made up of the actors, and 5) paintings as culture, or, the relationships between paintings and culture.

The second preliminary point concerns the method of our study. Stated generally, the method of study must fit the object under investigation. For example, theories of action must be used when investigating aspects of action, while theories of social relations must be adopted to study group relationships. However, this being only a general requirement, it is necessary to look for a method which is more specific for the study of paintings. In order to proceed in that direction I shall review two influential theories of art, namely those of Georg Simmel and Pitirim A. Sorokin.

Simmel developed his method of study from the philosophy of life (*Lebens philosophie*), the sociology of culture (*Kultursoziologie*), and sociological aesthetics (*Soziologische Aestitik*). The key concept of his work is that of life (*Leben*). Two aspects of life are relevant in this context, one is the continual flow or stream of life and the other is the crystallization in the self-perfection or self-completion of life. The first aspect is beyond *life* (*mehr Leben*), which appears in the dynamic rhythm of evolving life in its physiological stages. The second aspect is *beyond* life (*mehr als Leben*), as an end product created by man in the spiritual realm ; the latter becomes separated from life. This second aspect is most relevant to works of art. Art creates 'form', in other words, it is a figuration or a phenomenon of culture (*Kulturgebilde*). It is both existence and the formation of life. A work of art is both life that has become form, a form that has taken on life. Culture derives from life, but becomes an existence of its own, while at the same time remaining part of life. This duplicity is a characteristic of art.

Simmel understood art in this original, dialectical way. Thus, he did not start out with a definition of art or paintings followed by an interpretation. He started out from the works of art themselves. His famous examples were the self-portrait of Rembrandt, the Last Supper by Leonardo da Vinci, and the like (*Zur Philosophie*

der kunst: Philosophische und kunstphilosophische Aufsätze, 1922).

In contrast, Sorokin raises very different questions as can be seen in his monumental work *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, Written in four volumes. In the first volume *Fluctuation of Forms of Art* we find the following questions. 'Is there any uniform sequence in the flourishing of various arts in the history of a given culture?' (Ch. V), and after making a preliminary critical survey of theories on the subject, he asks 'Is the curve of art development uniformly similar in various societies and cultures?' (Ch. VI). Further, Sorokin distinguishes three styles of art, i. e., ideational, sensate (visual), and mixed types (idealistic, cubistic, and the like) of art; in another classification he distinguishes ascetic, sexual and intermediate types of art, classified by country and periods of time. Sorokin's descriptive method, then, can be said to be more quantitative than qualitative.

Even though the methods of Simmel and Sorokin are useful and instructive, we cannot ascribe to them because of the following problems. Simmel's concept of life is clearly philosophical, almost metaphysical; it refers to life as endless continuity from generation to generation; its bearers (Trägers) are individuals. It is difficult to see whether Simmel's concept of life has the same value as sociological concepts like life-style or way of living. Simmel's concept is also idealistic, spiritual as well as dialectic; it has come on stage only since the 20th century. Since it has been pointed out that different ages have been influenced by central ideas such as the concept of 'being' (Sein) in classical Greece, the idea of 'God' in the Middle Ages, and that of 'nature' since the Renaissance, works of art before the 20th century cannot be explained mainly with the concept of life.

As for Sorokin's method, first, his threefold classification of art into ideational, sensate, and mixed types is somewhat arbitrary because every culture contains each of these only partially, so that it becomes difficult to classify paintings along these lines. Also, many paintings actually belong in the mixed-type category. Further, since the criteria of his classification are restricted by types of society and periods of time, it is necessary to study these restrictions themselves. Secondly, there are other difficulties in a classification of genres, ages, and countries. These classifications are quite relative, so that it is difficult to decide on the criteria themselves. For example, it is difficult to make distinctions according to the

country where an artist was born, or where he actually lived without being born there. Thirdly, it is problematic whether a quantitative method is fit for comparing works of art and grasping their value. Because of these difficulties involved in both Simmel's and Sorokin's conceptualizations, I wish to attempt a different approach, which is related to the sociology of science and technology.

3. What are the basic characteristics of paintings?

As stated earlier, the subject matter of a sociology of paintings are the paintings themselves. We have to begin with saying that a painting is a 'thing', even if this will evoke some resistance from those who see the essence of a painting in its aesthetic value. This objection is quite understandable; but nevertheless it is true that pictures are material things. They are usually drawn on canvas by means of brushes, coloring materials, etc. Paintings cannot be thought of without referring to painting materials, which tend to differ culturally, ethnically, and also technically, since the use of materials widely depends on the progress of science that a society has reached.

Evidently, painting materials by themselves do not constitute paintings, they presuppose the act of drawing by an artist. His act determines the meaning of the resulting picture. But before looking into the internal meaning of pictures, let us first analyse external appearances.

Two somewhat different definitions of paintings can be found in dictionaries. Accordingly, a painting can be defined as 'the shape of an object drawn on a flat surface' (Kōjien, Iwanami), and also as 'the art of representing shapes of things by means of lines and color on a plane surface' (Dictionary of Philosophy, Heibonsha). The former simply describes pictures as the result of drawing, while the latter points to the act of artful drawing. The common elements they refer to are the elements of shapes on a plane surface. Especially the latter element 'a plane surface' is a peculiar feature of paintings. The act of the painter reduces three or more dimensions to only two. Three dimensional things are made two-dimensional, while the fourth dimension of time is also transcended in the case of a painting representing an event. The painting of two-dimensional things can be said to reveal a 'progressive' mode, while the reduction of time in the case of painting representing an event can be said to reveal a mode of past time.

But whatever the mode of a picture, all paintings require a technique of changing shapes from solid to plane ones. As for this technique, we note some interesting similarities and differences with techniques that are found, for example, in mechanical engineering. Both techniques relate to matter, but the one of art aims at expressing an aesthetic value and at communicating it to other people, while techniques of engineering aim at production of things. Techniques of art are personal; they cannot be communicated in the strict sense of the word, while techniques of modern technology are object of general learning; they can easily be transferred from person to person.

After considering the basic characteristics of paintings and comparing painting with techniques of other production, we now turn to characteristics of actual paintings and the act of appreciating art.

4. The action point of view.

The action that constitutes a painting is not limited to painting itself. It includes also the act of appreciating pictures of art, possessing, evaluating and selling them. The most important actions, however, are drawing itself and appreciation, because no art is possible without these two.

The act of drawing is similar to that of writing. Both drawing and writing are done on a plane surface, both express something with the intention of communicating it to others, and the actor does some contemplation about the content of his intended communication before he enters the stage of production. Other common aspects are that the actor follows some rules and customs, and using tools with a certain degree of skill. There are instances where the differences between drawing and writing are blurred. For example, it is difficult to decide whether the pictorial symbols of the Easter Island are indeed pictures or a piece of writing. The same difficulty pertains to the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs and the ancient Chinese characters that still can be seen as pictures. Modern graphic art also is a case in point; here, conversely, letters are modified into pictures. However, the differences between drawing and writing are usually taken for granted. Writing consists in combining words into sentences, while drawing is expressing something visually using lines and color in a concrete but also imaginative and thoughtful way. Pieces of writing can be understood when they are written

according to the rules of grammar and syntax, the ability of reading being a prerequisite for understanding. In contrast to writing, there are no such limitations to the understanding of works of art. This is why they can be enjoyed beyond national boundaries; they transcend time. With the exception of abstract art, no one will mistake a portrait with a landscape. However, individual differences in understanding and appreciating works of art cannot be overlooked. The same is true of course in the case of reading. But in the latter case, except for the ability of reading, expert knowledge is necessary to understand foreign languages, which, moreover, may be subject to specific ways of writing. Western languages are written from right to left, Hebrew and Arabic vice versa, while Japanese can be written in different ways. In the case of drawing no specific order is required.

The aforementioned similarities and differences are representative for the distinctive character of painting and literature as areas of culture. These areas can be seen as complementary, as may be suggested by the literary saying 'She looks as if she had stepped out of a picture'. This saying implies that there are things that cannot be expressed in words and that, consequently, there are limitations as to what can be expressed in words concerning visual beauty. Conversely, the beauty of poems cannot be fully expressed in a painting. All this suggests that pictures and sentences may have specific beauty inherent in the medium in question and that they are possibly complementary as areas of culture.

Now, we come to the aspect of looking at paintings. Generally speaking, one is inclined to consider looking at art merely as an act of appreciation, while one usually considers the act of drawing as very different from appreciation. This is only partly and superficially so. As is the case of preparatory sketches and paintings that are destroyed by the artist, pictures are not always drawn in order to be shown to the public. Therefore, looking at a painting and appreciating it is not one and the same thing. Seeing is actually an important aspect of drawing itself, since the artist usually draws while observing both a model-object and his painting to-be-finished. When not using a model, he may rely on his memory of previously seen objects. Seeing and drawing, then, are simultaneously occurring and mutually related actions.

5. The act of appreciation and ways of relating to art

According to the dictionary, to appreciate art means to understand, to taste, and to enjoy it. This common sense meaning of appreciating art contains two quite different aspects of relating to art. 'Enjoying' a work of art is to have an eye for its beauty and to be pleased with it, while 'understanding' art usually means much more than a mere appreciation of its aesthetic value. Understanding art implies understanding the artist, his way of thinking, his view of life, the techniques he uses, etc. The latter is an act that discovers aesthetic value; it is a dynamic and emergent activity that can grow, and possibly can change into criticism. From this we can conclude that, broadly, there are two categories of art appreciators, passive and active ones.

There are several ways of relating to art. Based on the way of relating, we can distinguish four categories of persons. First, I wish to call primary group, in the sense as this term is used by Cooley, those persons who relate most intensely to the artist: his friends and associates, the artists belonging to the same school, dealers of art, and art commentators. These persons make up a kind of spiritual Gemeinschaft (Geistesgemeinschaft), holding in common a certain sense of beauty and methods of expression, possibly entailing a sense of competition within the same sphere.

Second, there are associations that organize artists of more or less the same school, exhibit their works, and thus enhance their social recognition. This is necessary for the institution of art which makes possible the economically and professionally independent status of the artists.

Third, there are also persons who relate to art because of economical interests, which they partly share with the artists themselves, since the latter have to sell works in order to make a living. In the strict sense of the word, one can call artists only those who are economically independent. As is largely known, there have been many artists who were unable to sell their work during their life time. Therefore, many an artist is forgotten after his death—forgetting is some kind of social act, too—but others find recognition and even fame when they are no longer around. At any rate, dealers of art are quite important to artists, because they change aesthetic value into economic value. Sezanne, Monet, Picasso and many others succeeded largely because of the assistance of dealers.

Fourth, there is a group of persons who are concerned with exchange of information about aesthetical knowledge and techniques. Scholars, professional journalists of art, and critics belong to this group. The information they offer influences artists and the public alike. These persons are not only engaged in the explanation of aesthetic value and the transmission of this knowledge but also in the production and manipulation of this knowledge. To borrow a phrase from Max Weber, the general public is as it were 'tone-deaf' (unmusikalisch), so that it is easily subject to manipulation. In contrast, when the public is well educated with respect to art, manipulation is rendered more difficult; what is even more, in this case the influence of the public on art through public opinion and appreciation is considerable. Max Scheler has showed this with his considerations of dilettanti and *dilettantisimi*. In this sense, the public may even usher in new currents in the world of art.

6. Conclusion

The above is only a partial summary of my sociological study of paintings, centering on some problems related to the action-point of view and to persons who are in one or other way involved in art. An other part of the study concerns the style and genres of paintings and the mutual relatedness of paintings and culture. Further, we touched on some problems from the point of view of the sociology of science and technology, problems of winning and missing prices, problems of the education of art and methods of teaching it, etc., all of which could not be included in this summary.

Although one encounters many difficulties in a study of the sociology of paintings, it is an exciting field of study, as we saw for example with respect to the artist's social relationships within which several factors play a role, such as his personality and sociability, his personal relations with family and friends, and even his physical condition of health (Cf. P. Sandblo, *Creativity and Disease*: How illness affects art). Last but no least, a comparison of artists and scientists is highly interesting. The difficulties involved in a sociological study of art derive from its taken-for-granted nature, that is, paintings are largely a matter of daily experience. As may be gathered from an old saying *De gustibus non est disputandum*, it derives also from the fact that appreciation is commonly

thought to be a matter of individual taste. Obviously, there is individual taste, but we have seen that artists and paintings cannot be discussed without reference to their social and cultural relationships.

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